

Commission reviews application work plan, relationship with partners and conflicts of interest

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The Charter School Commission gathered for its fourth official meeting in Seattle near the end of June. Commissioners reviewed an offer from State Superintendent of Public Instruction Randy Dorn and interviewed candidates for Executive Director. The commission developed a timeline to create charter application materials and approved a contract with the National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA). Commissioners also approved a final conflict of interest policy and held a brief brainstorming session for the commission's strategic vision.

The public portion of this latest meeting had a late start and early end. The commission held executive sessions in the morning and afternoon, where they had a chance to interview final candidates for the executive director position. After the morning interview, Seattle schools blogger Melissa Westbrook had some advice for the commission during public comment. She said that even though they have legal and staff support, it is very important for the commissioners to fully understand the state charter law and its implications. As an example she shared that at-risk students, under Washington law, can technically include gifted children. This could lead to unintended consequences in the charter law's implementation.

The commission briefly reviewed an offer from Randy Dorn. Dorn stated his wishes to begin relationship building and would like to officially meet with commissioners soon. Commissioners voted to invite Dorn to address them at their next meeting. Dorn likewise invited commissioners to see the work being done at Lincoln High School in Tacoma. Commissioners approved a motion to make this opportunity available to members.

Over the next three months, the commission's primary duty is to complete an application and review process for charter school applicants. The official deadline to have a functioning draft of the application materials ready for the public is September 22nd. The commission has a lot of work to do, with a final materials list that includes:

- Letter of intent
- Strategic vision
- RFP
- Application form and online submission form
- Rubric and instructions
- Draft charter contract

Commissioners teleconferenced with William Haft of NACSA to discuss the timeline, work, and division of labor for all parts of the material production. Commissioners will base much of their work on NACSA drafts and frameworks, specifically for the letter of intent, RFP, application

form, draft charter contract, rubric and instructions. Commissioners will draft the strategic vision themselves and their legal support will work on the Washington-specific aspects of the draft charter contract. They also plan to review and revise all work products provided by NACSA.

William Haft and NACSA will help the commission throughout the entire process with most of the work, including an online application option. According to Haft, the cost for the online application service would be about \$3,000, but is covered by its Gates Foundation grant. The expected final outcome for the application evaluation process is less clear.

Haft offered to take the lead on developing application evaluation teams. He explained the process that most NACSA-sponsored review teams go through during a typical application review. Under his scenario, five reviewers would be chosen from a national pool and could then be vetted by the commission. These reviewers would conduct the review process for charter school applicants and make their recommendations to the commission in the form of reports. Each report's recommendations would be reviewed by the commission. The public would then be allowed to comment. Commissioners agreed that they wanted more time to review this process before making any final decisions. The commission reserved the right to contract out or otherwise supply members to this team.

After reviewing the work that needs to be done over the next few months, the commission discussed its contract with NACSA. William Haft tried to make clear that NACSA views the commission as a client, and the contract is not legally binding. Commissioners are free to walk away from the relationship whenever they wish. Haft and commissioners outlined the potential support from Gates and Walton foundations. Commission Chair Steve Sundquist wanted the relationship, expectations and funding to be as clear as possible. The contract was approved by the commission as written.

The commission also approved a conflict of interest policy. Under the policy, commissioners may not accept gifts from charters or charter operators, but they will be able to visit charter schools if they pay for the visit. Commissioners reviewed state ethics law with their legal counsel and ran through various scenarios that would be in compliance or non-compliance with their new policy.

Most striking was the commission's final decision on recusals. Hotly debated at previous sessions, the commission decided not to enforce an explicit recusal policy. Instead, commissioners will be allowed to recuse themselves from a decision if they believe there is a conflict of interest during an application review. After a complete draft is finalized, the conflict of interest policy will be posted to the charter commission home page.

Near the end of the meeting, commissioners had a brainstorming session for their strategic vision. After a quick first round, the following principles made it onto a draft list of qualities that commissioners would like to impart on charter schools in Washington:

- High quality
- Significant outcomes of student achievement for at-risk populations
- Multiple measures of achievement
- Authentic and sustainable to the community it serves
- Expansion of authority for teachers

- Neighborhood schools
- Acceleration of innovation
- Sharing best practices of learning
- Building strong community and business relationships
- Washington state support for innovators
- Support diverse portfolio of delivery models
- Cultural sensitivity and responsiveness
- Strong boards and governance

Commissioners also discussed upcoming public hearings to review the commission's proposed rules. These are now posted on the commission's website. One public hearing is scheduled to take place on the west side of the state during the next charter commission meeting. The other hearing will be held at the Spokane Public Library on Thursday, July 11.

The next full meeting of the commission is scheduled for Tuesday, July 30, from 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. at the Central Administration Building in Tacoma.